

Straight Talk Style Guide

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Straight Talk Tips

Straight Talk Tips	Examples
Plan Your Letter What's the story?	Ask yourself: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ What do you want to achieve? (purpose) ❑ Who is the letter going to? (users) ❑ When, where, why, and how will they deal with the letter? (scenarios of use)
Use a Reference Line to Tell What Your Letter is About	Goes between the inside address and the salutation. Bold, Arial (sans serif)
Focus on People Help users see themselves in the text Use personal pronouns or name the person doing the action.	Use words like “I, me, we, our, ours” when referring to DOR. Use “you, your” when referring to the taxpayer. Exception: You can use headings that state a question the way a taxpayer would ask it. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ I am writing in response... ❑ Jane Jones will contact you ... ❑ You may copy this certificate...
Use Short, Simple Sentences If you have to read a sentence more than once to understand it, it is too long. Keep each sentence to one thought— or two tightly connected thoughts.	
Avoid unnecessary words	Before: The purpose of this letter is to tell you that we have accepted your claim. After: We have accepted your claim.
Think about the logical order of the events or information	Before: Interested persons, on or before March 1, 2003, may submit to the Hearing Clerk written comments regarding this proposal. After: We invite you to comment on this proposal. Send comments to: Hearing Clerk PO Box 400 Olympia, Washington 98501 Deadline: March 1, 2003

Use Action Verbs Use verbs, not the nouns that hide verbs.	Affix a signature = sign Make payment = pay Denial = deny Maintenance = maintain, keep up Concurrence = concur, agree Assignment = assign Transmission = transmit, send Recommendation = recommend Failure = fail, if you don't
Choose Words Carefully Use words readers know Use short and simple words	Cease = stop Commence = begin Employ = use Furnish = give Inquire = ask Prior to = before Procure = get Request = ask Remit = send, pay Retain = keep Terminate = end Transmit = send Utilize = use
<input type="checkbox"/> Avoid "legalisms"	Aforesaid = the Provided = if, but (new sentence) Pursuant to = (rewrite as "The laws says...") Said "person" = the "person"
<input type="checkbox"/> Define terms, if necessary	
<input type="checkbox"/> Use 'must,' 'may,' and 'should' appropriately. Do not use 'shall' in letters.	For obligation, use "must" For permission, use "may" For a strong suggestion, use "should" For a physical possibility, use "can"
<input type="checkbox"/> Use gender-neutral words	Gender-neutral: Each employee must fill out a time sheet every week. Gender-specific: Each employee must fill out her time sheet every week.
Make the Text Visual Leave white space on the page. Use lists and tables when possible.	

Use Chunking Separate information into manageable pieces.	
Use Bold Headings Headings should be bold type in a san serif font (such as Arial).	
Make Addresses Stand Out If space permits, display addresses, within the text of a letter, in address blocks.	Complete and return the enclosed form. Please mail it to: Department of Revenue PO Box 47478 Olympia, Washington 98504-7478

Grammar/Punctuation

Grammar/Punctuation	Examples
AAA	
Active Voice Write in the active voice □ “who is doing what to whom”	Active Voice (Preferred): All homeowners must complete Form C. You must complete Form C. Passive Voice: Form C must be completed by all homeowners.
Acronyms <i>Please be conservative in the use of acronyms.</i> Use the full name of a program, plan, or agency if it appears only once in the text. Place the acronym in parentheses after the name when this abbreviation will appear two or more times in the text. Try to use an appropriate designation such as <i>the plan</i> , <i>the agency</i> , or <i>the program</i> to limit the use of acronyms.	Electronic Payment Management System (EPMS)
CCC	
Capitalization Generally, do not capitalize the name of a specific tax. <i>Note:</i> Capitalize the name of a tax classification only when you refer to the exact name, per the excise tax return, followed by the words “tax classification.”	“...is subject to the retail sales tax.” “...is taxable under the Retail Sales tax classification.”
Capitalize “Department of Revenue,” “Department,” and “Agency” when referring to the Department of Revenue.	
Capitalize the word “state” in “Washington State,” but not in “state of Washington.”	
Capitalize the names of divisions and sections in the Department of Revenue.	Taxpayer Account Administration Telephone Information Center
Capitalize the words “program, unit, section, office, and division” only when they are officially part of a group’s title.	Special Programs Division, Executive Office, etc.
Capitalize these words only when referring to a specific body already mentioned by its full name:	committee commission board department director

Capitalize the word “building” only when it is part of the official name.	Tumwater building General Administration Building Empire State Building
Capitalize the word “biennium” only when referring to a specific biennium.	1985-87 Biennium the funds appropriated for this biennium
Capitalize the word “fiscal” only when referring to a specific fiscal year.	2000 Fiscal year the funds appropriated for this fiscal year
Capitalize “senator” or “representative” only when used with a legislator’s name.	Senator Tom Jones said that... The senator said that...
Always capitalize the following:	Legislature Congress Senate House House of Representatives
Do not capitalize the following:	legislative legislator legislation
Always capitalize “Governor”	
Capitalize “federal” only when it is part of an official name.	Federal Reserve Board It is subject to federal, state, and local taxes.
Always capitalize “Capitol” when referring to the Washington State Legislative Building	the steps of the Capitol
“In care of” notations should contain a lowercase “c,” slash, and lowercase “o.” Word processing programs will incorrectly auto-capitalize the “c,” so remember to double check for accuracy.	Professor James Smith c/o Mr. Henry Jones
Commas in a series Use a comma before the “and” in a simple series. Remember to be consistent throughout your document.	She will be gone the first, third, and fifth day of each week.
Computer/web terms Use the terms as written in the “Examples” column.	e-mail e-commerce, e-business home page Internet Intranet online web web page web site

DDD	
Dates and days <input type="checkbox"/> Spell out months. (Do not abbreviate.) <input type="checkbox"/> Do not add “th, rd, or nd” to the day when it follows the month. <input type="checkbox"/> When using a day and date, separate with commas. <input type="checkbox"/> When using the month, day, and year, separate the year with commas. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not place a comma between the month and the year.	Correct: September 17 Incorrect: September 17 th Correct: On Monday, September 17, the initiative began. Correct: On March 10, 2003, the initiative began. Correct: September 2001 Incorrect: September, 2001
Dollars Do not add a decimal point or zeros to a <i>whole</i> dollar amount.	Correct: \$1, \$5, \$110,000 Incorrect: \$1.00, \$5.00, \$110,000.00
HHH	
Hyphenation When hyphenating, apply this rule: <input type="checkbox"/> If an adjective precedes a noun, hyphenate. <input type="checkbox"/> If an adjective follows the noun, do not hyphenate.	Out-of-state auditor The auditor is out of state.
LLL	
Legislative Citations No periods between letters in “RCW” and “WAC.” <i>Note:</i> Avoid citing RCWs and WACs if possible by using plain English to explain the citation.	RCW 1.08.010, chapter 34.05 RCW, Title 43 RCW WAC 296.34.020, chapter 296.34 WAC, Title 296 WAC
Lists Use a numbered list for instructions Use a bulleted list to identify separate items or conditions	
No periods are needed after short phrases in a list if the introductory statement is grammatically complete. Use periods after short phrases that are essential to completing the introductory statement.	When you next order office supplies, please include these items: <input type="checkbox"/> Copier toner <input type="checkbox"/> Fax paper <input type="checkbox"/> File folders Please get me year-end figures on: <input type="checkbox"/> Domestic sales revenues. <input type="checkbox"/> Total operating costs. <input type="checkbox"/> Net operating income.

<p>Make lists parallel.</p>	<p>Incorrect:</p> <p>Individuals applying for permits must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ be 21 or older. ❑ possession of a valid driver’s license. ❑ residency in this state is required. <p>Correct:</p> <p>Individuals applying for permits must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ be 21 or older. ❑ possess a valid driver’s license. ❑ reside in this state.
NNN	
<p>Numbers</p> <p>Numbers zero through ten are spelled out. Numerals are used for numbers above ten.</p> <p><i>Note:</i> Use the same style when expressing related numbers above and below ten.</p> <p><i>Note:</i> Use figures (even from 1 through 10) to express periods of time when they are used as technical measurements or significant statistics (as in discounts, interest rates, and credit terms)</p> <p>All numbers are spelled out when they begin a sentence.</p> <p>Million and thousand are spelled out when writing whole numbers in text.</p> <p>Numbers below 100 are hyphenated; numbers above are not.</p>	<p>Correct: She is five minutes late. He is 15 minutes early.</p> <p>Incorrect: She is 5 minutes late. He is fifteen minutes early.</p> <p>We have 5 dogs, 11 cats, and 1 rabbit.</p> <p>A 35-hour workweek a 30-year mortgage a note due in 6 months</p> <p>Seventy-five people . . .</p> <p>\$13 million, 12 thousand pounds</p> <p>twenty-five, three thousand, fifty-five hundred</p>
PPP	
<p>Percents</p> <p>Express percentages in figures and spell out the word “percent.”</p> <p><i>Note:</i> The % symbol may be used in technical or statistical material.</p>	<p>Correct: We have answers from 25 percent of them.</p> <p>Incorrect: We have answers from 25% of them. We have answers from three percent of them.</p>

Periods When writing for the Internet, only one space is necessary after a period. Use two spaces after a period in correspondence.	
Phone numbers Use parentheses to separate area codes in a phone number. <i>Note:</i> Toll-free numbers do not have parentheses. They should be separated with hyphens.	Correct: (360) 902-5405 Incorrect: 360-902-5405, 360/902-5405, 360.902.5405 Correct: 1-800-451-7985 Incorrect: (800) 451-7985
Position titles Capitalize position titles when they precede a person's name.	Compensation Unit Supervisor John Smith attended the meeting. John Smith is a compensation unit supervisor with that organization.
SSS	
State names Always spell out state names (address block and text).	Correct: Toppenish, Washington; Carmel, California Incorrect: Toppenish, WA; Carmel, Calif.
TTT	
Time For time "on the hour," zeros are not needed to denote minutes unless you want to give special emphasis to the precise hour. Punctuate a.m. and p.m. Use "to" instead of a hyphen. Use "noon" rather than 12 p.m., and "midnight" rather than 12 a.m. If the start and end times are both in the morning or afternoon/evening, use the a.m. or p.m. reference only once. If the time span stretches from a.m. to p.m. (or vice versa), then use both references.	2 p.m. Not: 2:00 p.m. p.m. Not: pm 2 to 4 p.m. Not: 2-4 p.m. 10 to 11 a.m. 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.

WWW	
<p>Web addresses (also referred to as URLs)</p> <p>When a web address comes at the end of a sentence, use a period.</p> <p>Try to avoid splitting a web address over two lines, if at all possible. If you can't avoid it, do not add a hyphen at the end of the first line.</p>	

Word Usage

Word Usage	Examples
Affect is a verb meaning to influence, change, or assume. <i>See also effect.</i>	The storm may affect our schedule.
Agencywide is one word, not hyphenated.	
Assure means to give someone confidence. <i>See also ensure and insure.</i>	I can assure you that it is true.
Capital is used when referring to the capital campus, capital budget, capital grounds, etc.	
Capitol is only used to refer to the building itself.	
When referring to a department , use the singular form of the verb with <i>it</i> , not <i>they</i> , as the subject.	The Department of Corrections has advised me that it will continue to maintain its facilities.
Effect is a noun meaning result, or less often, a verb meaning to cause. <i>See also affect.</i>	It had little effect.
Ensure is to be used except when referring to insurance.	
Insure means to protect against loss. <i>See also assure and ensure.</i>	We will insure your property.
“It’s” may only be used as the contraction for “it is.”	It’s correct to use this contraction.
Judgment , not judgement	
More than or over may be used before numbers, but “more than” is preferred.	More than 10 percent...
Non with a common word is not hyphenated.	nonstandard, nonstop, nonprofit
Non with a proper word is hyphenated.	non-American
Percent is always spelled out as one word.	
Proper words prefixed by non are hyphenated.	non-American
Staff does not stand alone.	Use <i>the staff</i> or <i>staff members</i> .
Statewide is one word, not hyphenated.	
Which and that refers to animals and things (avoid use as a pronoun).	Laura’s report on employee benefits, <i>which</i> I sent you last week, should be of some help. The report <i>that</i> I sent you last week should be of some help.
Who refers only to people.	Who is talking?
Whose is the possessive form of who, which, and that; it can refer to either animate or inanimate objects.	Whose house is it?

Letter Format

Letter Format	Examples
Keep letter to one page, if at all possible. DOR standard	Reference Line and Headings: Arial, 12 point font or greater Body text: Times New Roman, 12 point font 1 inch top, bottom, and side margins You can revert to 11.5 font, side margins of .75, a top margin of 2, and a bottom margin of .5 in order to fit a letter on one page.
Use two spaces between the state and the zip code. Word-processing programs may advise using only one space, but use two.	Olympia, Washington 98504 Olympia, WA 98504
Courtesy copy notations should contain two lowercase “c”s followed by a colon, tab, name, title, and agency (title isn’t always necessary, but the rest are). Word-processing programs may auto-correct this to make the first letter a capital, but in this case, use lowercase letters.	cc: Fred Kiga, Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor